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David Van Zanten

Second Empire Architecture in Philadelphia

What is "Second Empire" architecture in Philadelphia? David Van Zanten, an architectural historian at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of the architectural section of the catalogue of the current exhibition, approaches this question from two standpoints. He shows that City Hall, often regarded as America's finest Second Empire building, owes its inspiration to the style of an earlier period, and argues that Philadelphia's most characteristically Second Empire architect is Frank Furness.

The brilliance of the art, architecture, and urban planning of Second Empire Paris could not have passed without leaving a mark upon Philadelphia, then America's second largest city. What was conveniently known here as the "Second Empire Style" came to pervade local decorative arts and architecture after the Civil War, inspiring many architectural projects, including City Hall and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. But since a cultural epoch is a complex web of ideas and forms, different observers carried away contrasting conceptions of Paris. There were several reflections of the Second Empire in Philadelphia, corresponding to a similar diversity in French architecture under the rule of Napoleon III.

The "Second Empire Style"

William Penn's plan of Philadelphia of 1682 ordered the grid of city streets around two broad, 100-foot avenues crossing at right angles at the center of the city. Penn conceived his plan at the very moment that the Baroque ideal of cities organized by means of monumental avenues, having spread from Italy to France, finally arrived in England, and appeared in several plans for the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666. In America the Baroque avenue system, hesitantly stated in Penn's plan, became the organizing principle of Annapolis (1695) and Williamsburg (1698).

Such Baroque plans demanded public monuments to mark the crossings of their axes. At Annapolis and Williamsburg eighteenth-century red-brick structures responded to this need in their brave but homely way. But the crossing point of the Philadelphia axes, which Penn laid out as an open square, remained vacant despite a series of attempts to fill it appropriately. A meetinghouse was erected there in the 1680s, which fell into disuse on account of its distance from the earliest inhabited part of Philadelphia along the Delaware. Benjamin Latrobe erected his domed pump house there in 1798. John Haviland drew up a project for a city hall there in 1835. But only in 1871 did work begin on the present City Hall and County Courthouse by John McArthur, and not until 1894 was it completed with the raising of Alexander Milne Calder's statue of William Penn to the top of its tower (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. John McArthur (1823–1890)
Philadelphia City Hall and County Courthouse, 1871–94

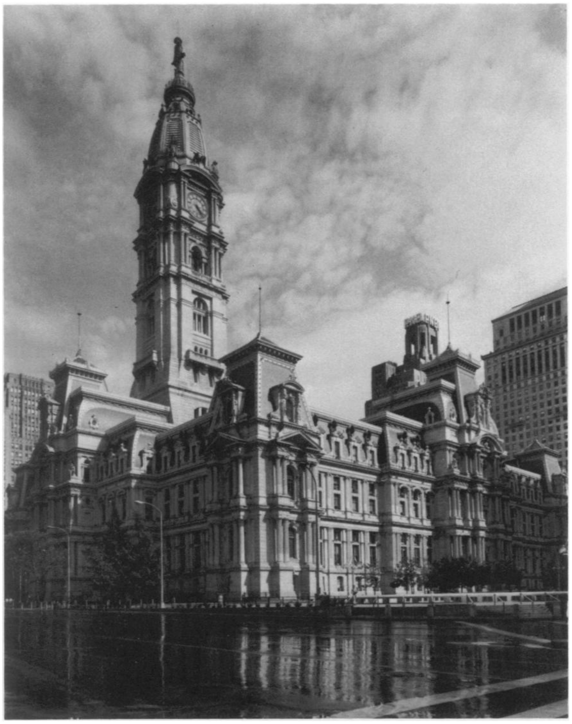
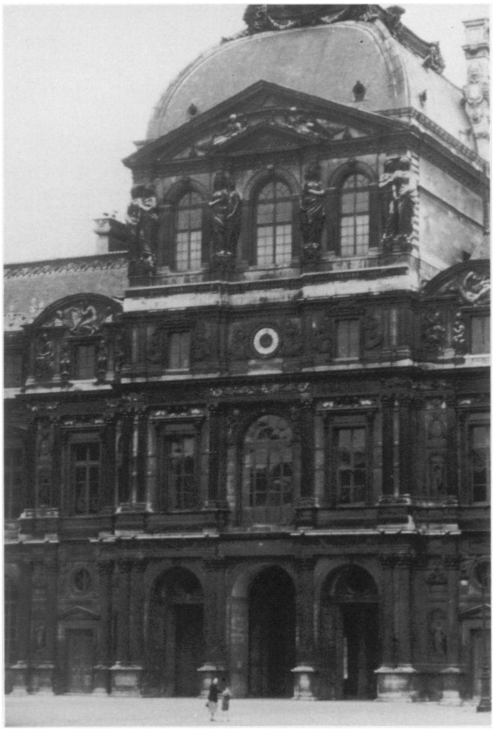


Fig. 3. Jacques Lemercier (c.1585–1654)
Pavillon de l'Horloge, Louvre, Paris, 1624–43



The problem that McArthur had inherited was a Baroque one almost two centuries old, and it seems appropriate that he solved it by adopting a French Baroque model: the Louvre, as it was redesigned by Jacques Lemercier in 1624–43 (fig. 3). McArthur multiplied Lemercier's Pavillon de l'Horloge by eight, repeating it at the center and at the corners of each side of his open square building and expanding it into the tower on the north side that terminates the vista down Broad Street. With great dramatic effect he continued the city's axes through his building by means of sequences of high colonnaded halls (*see* cover). The tower, already marking the end of the Broad Street vista, suggested a new avenue extending from it to the rocky promontory of Fairmount that, beginning in the 1870s, was planned and eventually constructed as the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

It was only because of recent architectural tendencies in France and their adoption by American architects, however, that McArthur took up Lemercier's model for his building. By the latter part of the seventeenth century, French architecture had already turned to the columniated classicism of Claude Perrault's eastern facade of the Louvre (1667–70), and it

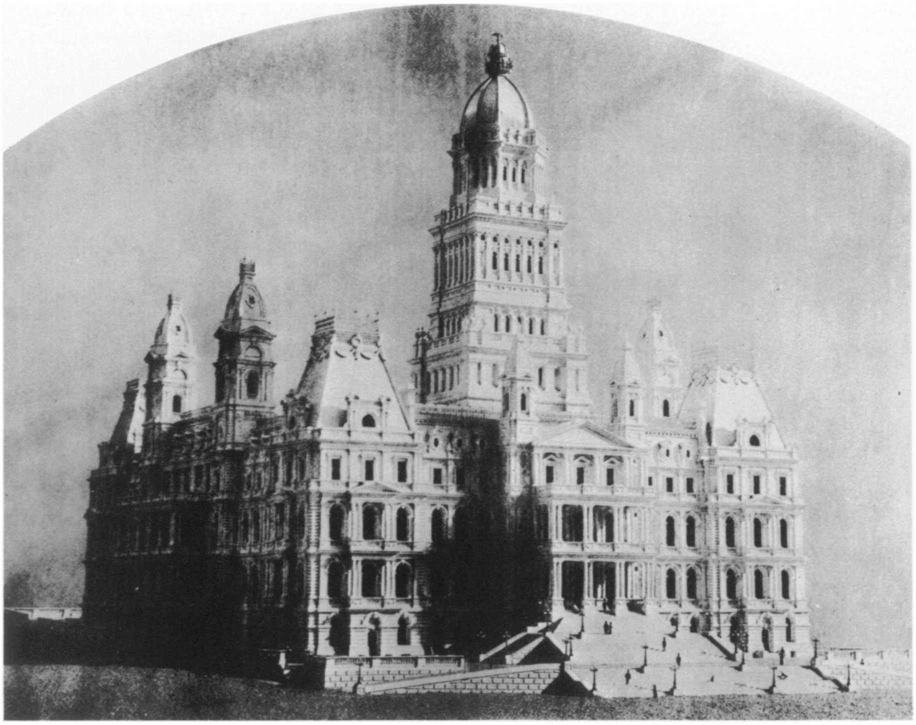


Fig. 2. Thomas Fuller (1822–1898) and Augustus Laver (1834–1898) Model of New York State Capitol, Albany, 1867 From *American Architect and Building News,* 1876

had been the English Georgian mode that America had imitated in its first government buildings. Lemercier's pavilion was redeemed from obscurity in the Cour Carrée of the Louvre when, in 1852, Napoleon III commissioned the architect L.-J.-T. Visconti to extend the palace as the seat of his new government. Visconti repeated the pavilion six times around the new Cour Napoléon III as the *leitmotif* of the New Louvre (fig. 4). Thus, modern administrative government came to be linked with this Baroque domestic (if palatial) form, and American architects, seeking a new motif characteristic of government buildings, quickly adopted Visconti's striking system of columned pavilions. G. J. F. Bryant and Arthur Gilman were the first with their Boston City Hall of 1860–62, followed by Fuller and Laver, evidently with the aid of Gilman, in the Albany statehouse project of 1867 (fig. 2), and a crowd of architects of capitols, courthouses, and city halls of the 1870s and 1880s—as well as the prolific Alfred Mullett, Supervising Architect of the United States from 1866. In 1873–75 one of Mullett's copies of the Louvre, a Post Office and Federal Courthouse, was erected on Ninth Street below Chestnut and Market, under McArthur's direction (now demolished). So the Philadelphia City Hall is based on an American model, which was in turn derived from a French paradigm of 1852 that was an expansion and transformation of a Baroque motif. The American copy of Visconti's paradigm has come to represent what is called the "Second Empire Style" in the United States. Yet Visconti's Louvre was not, in fact typical of the architecture of Second Empire Paris, and McArthur's and others' imitation of its style and characteristic pavilioned configuration was insistently avoided by most Second Empire architects in France. Both Visconti's paradigm and the American copies of it belonged conceptually to the 1830s rather than to the Second Empire.

Since Visconti was sixty-one years old when he conceived his design in 1852, and died soon after, in December, 1853, he can be regarded as an architect of the preceding reign of Louis Philippe (1830–48). The notion of adapting the seventeenth-century columned pavilion motif for a government building did not originate with him, but rather with one of the most brilliant architects of the reign of Louis Philippe, Jean-Nicolas Huyot, in his project for the completion of the Paris Palais de Justice of

1835 (fig. 5). Huyot's project, in turn, recalled the 1830s "Style Troubadour" on a monumental scale by using the mansarded pavilions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French architecture, then accepted as a characteristically "French" style. Visconti's intention in 1852 was to give the Louvre a uniquely "French" appearance. But to Gilman and Bryant, Fuller and Laver, Mullett and McArthur, the paradigm was not so much French as broadly governmental, and it was for that reason that they adopted it. In this they proceeded like the architects of the 1830s who accepted that the function of a building could be expressed by the reproduction of one or another historical style somehow linked in the public mind to that function: Gothic for churches, Greek for banks, Egyptian for prisons, and French Baroque for government buildings.

One often speaks, in referring to American nineteenth-century art, of "cultural lag"—the delayed arrival of European ideas in this country. It is therefore characteristic of American "Second Empire" architecture that it should be Louis Philippe in origin. The late Professor Robert C. Smith traced the over-decorated American "Second Empire" furniture of the 1860s and 1870s to models displayed at the Paris industrial exhibitions of 1844 and 1849. Most of the motifs that are to be seen on the interiors and exteriors of City Hall can be found in the impressive plates of Léon Feuchère's *Art industriel* of 1842, which illustrate the architecture and furniture of a model mansion of the "Style Troubadour" (fig 6). Thus McArthur and others like him were borrowing whole designs and symbols from abroad rather than rethinking the styles of buildings that they designed according to their functions.

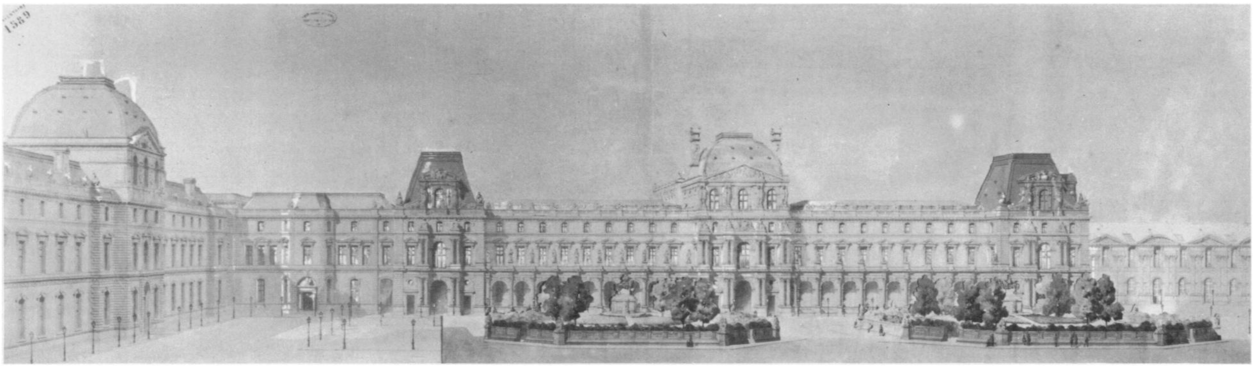


Fig. 4. Louis–Tullius–Joachim Visconti (1791–1853)
Cour Napoléon III, Louvre, Paris, 1852–57
Drawing by Hector Lefuel
Ink and wash on paper, 18 x 48"
(45.7 x 121.9 cm)
Palais National du Louvre, Direction de l'Architecture

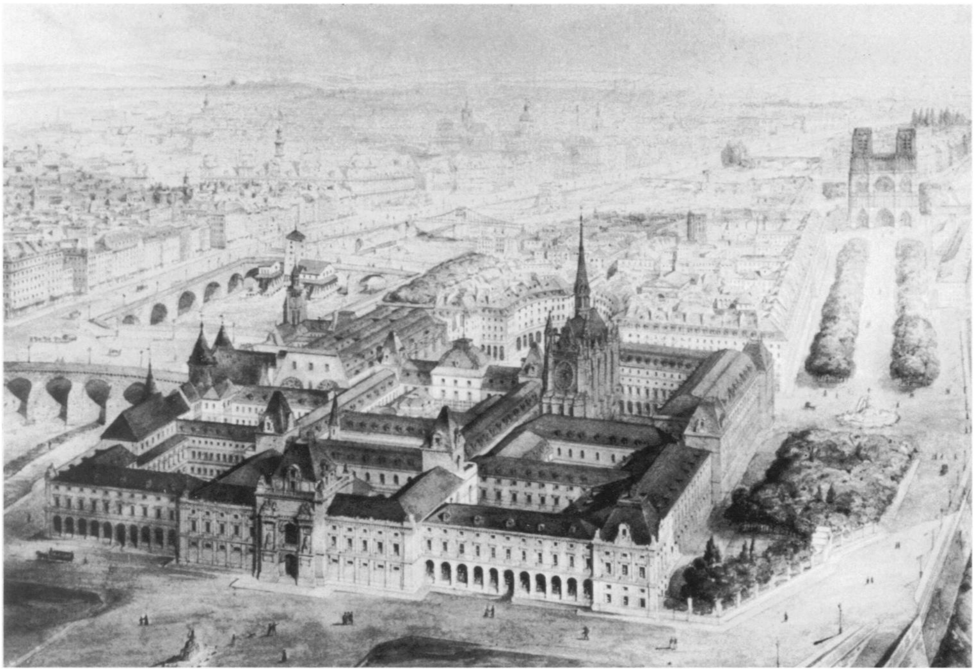


Fig. 5. Jean–Nicolas Huyot (1780–1840)
Project for the Palais de Justice, Paris, 1835
Musée Carnavalet, Paris

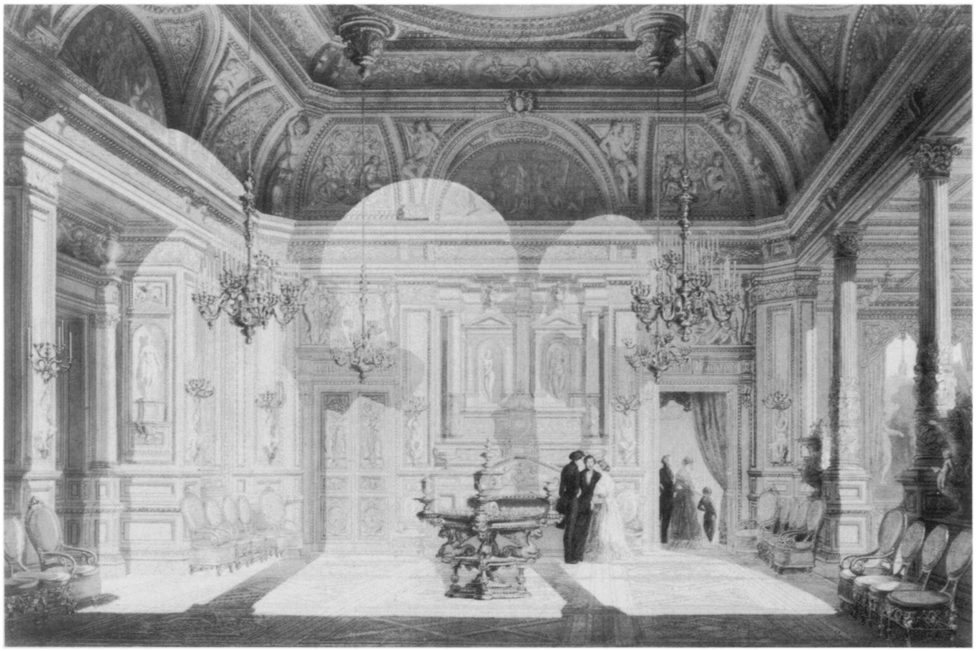


Fig. 6. Léon Feuchère (1804–1857)
Salon of a model country house in the "Style Troubadour"
Plate 61, Part I, from *L'Art industriel* (Paris, 1842)

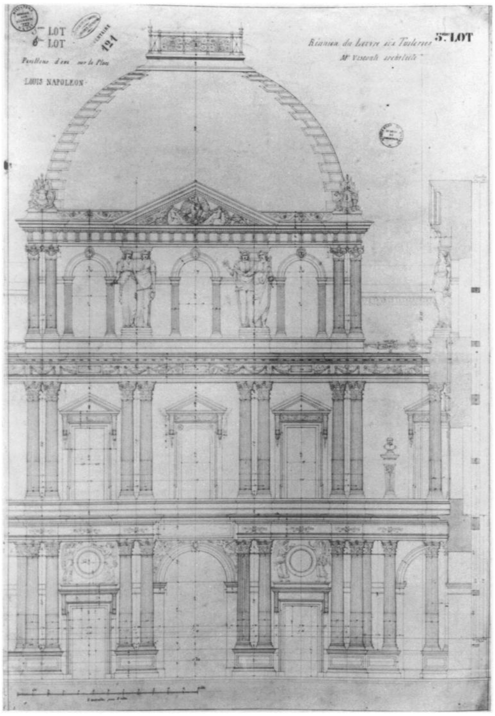


Fig. 7. Louis–Tullius–Joachim Visconti
Drawing for one of the axial pavilions of the Louvre, Paris, 1852 or 1853
Ink on paper, 38 x 26″ (97 x 66 cm)
Palais National du Louvre, Direction de l'Architecture

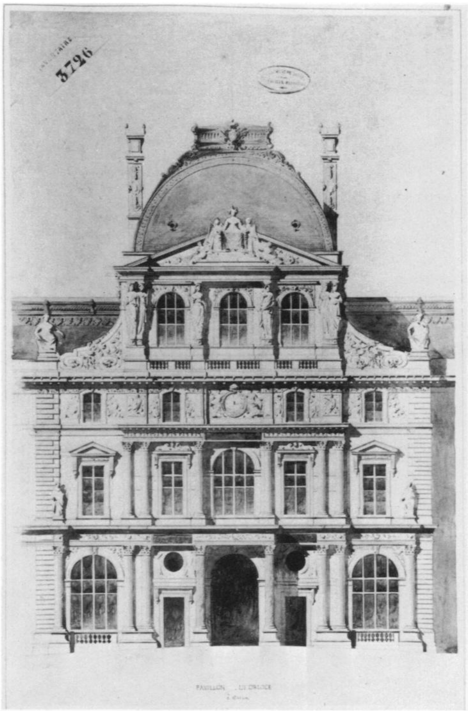


Fig. 8. Hector Lefuel
Drawing for the new west facade of the Pavillon de l'Horloge, Louvre, Paris, c.1854
Ink wash on tracing paper, 23 x 15″ (58 x 38 cm)
Palais National du Louvre, Direction de l'Architecture

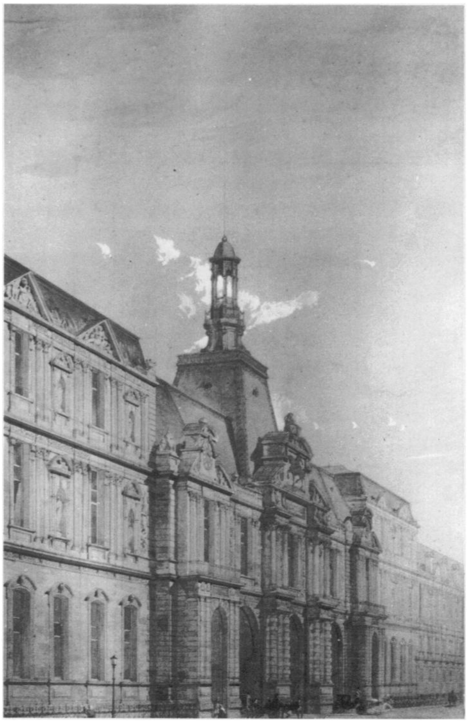


Fig. 9. Hector Lefuel
Study for the "Guichets du Carrousel,"
Louvre, Paris, 1861
Watercolor, 18 x 14″ (45.7 x 35.5 cm)
Palais National du Louvre. Direction de l'Architecture

The "Style Napoléon III"

Just as the phrase "Second Empire Style," referring to adaptations of Visconti's Louvre, is familiar in America, the phrase "Style Napoléon III" was once equally familiar in France, and also referred to buildings of the 1860s. These, however, are more difficult to characterize. This phrase was first applied not to those parts of the New Louvre designed by Visconti, but to the work of his successor as architect of that building, Hector Lefuel, who was nineteen years Visconti's junior and truly an architect of the Second Empire. Upon taking over from Visconti in 1854, Lefuel increased the three-dimensionality and massiveness of articulation of the pavilions, as can be seen by comparing the drawings of the two men (figs. 7 and 8). In 1861 Lefuel was asked to rebuild the Grand Gallery along the Seine and to open a gateway, the "Guichets du Carrousel," to accommodate the traffic from a bridge recently constructed over the river. Abandoning a solution using the pavilions, pediments, coupled columns, and narrow openings of the "Style Troubadour" (fig. 9), he settled upon the majestic, historically unfamiliar arches one sees

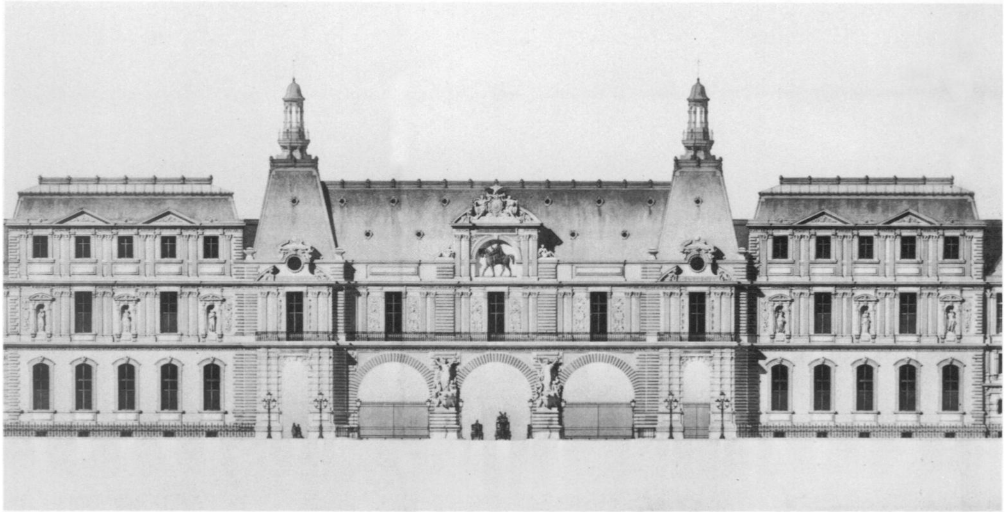


Fig. 10. Hector Lefuel
The "Guichets du Carrousel," Louvre, Paris, as executed (detail), before 1870
Ink wash on paper
Palais National du Louvre, Direction de l'Architecture

today with their elephantine moldings and gesticulating figures breasting the flow of traffic (fig. 10).

Lefuel's "Style Napoléon III" was a synthesis of many historical styles—the arches of the "guichets" are Syrian; the moldings, eighteenth-century in the manner of Gabriel; the wall treatment, inflated French Renaissance—used not for their associations but for their shapes. Lefuel's objective was to produce a powerful and united configuration for the gateway, and he found that an arch profile from one period and moldings from another accomplished that end. Furthermore, there is a peculiar quality in these forms that suggests thickness and weight and even the possibility of movement: the low, semi-circular profile of the arches truly seems to "spring," holding aloft the masonry wall above with three broad gestures, while the moldings of the intermediary piers project deeply and describe soft curves as if compressed in giving purchase to the arches' movements. You sense the thrusts and counterthrusts; you feel your way into Lefuel's architecture, empathizing with it (to use the word coined at the turn of the century to describe precisely this phenomenon). It is sculpted out of the masses of Parisian limestone composing the facades: the relief is so deep that the forms are read not as lean architectural members but rather as the thick shapes of a carved frieze, emerging and gesticulating like human bodies. It was the Renaissance that had first carved architecture in this way and the Roman and French Baroque that had brought the idea to fruition, evoking space inside wall planes with superimposed layers of carved columns, while implying life in the details through their rounding, undercutting, and distortion. In Gothic architecture decorative elements are thin, barely eked out of the wall, and the actual structural surfaces dominate. Lefuel's architecture was consistent in principle, though it merged distinct historical styles, and that principle was what came to be thought of as classical. Lefuel's design works in the manner that Geoffrey Scott explored in *The Architecture of Humanism*, and also held to be classical: "By the. . . excellent—because unconscious—testimony of speech, arches 'spring,' vistas 'stretch,' domes 'swell,' Greek temples are 'calm,' and Baroque facades are

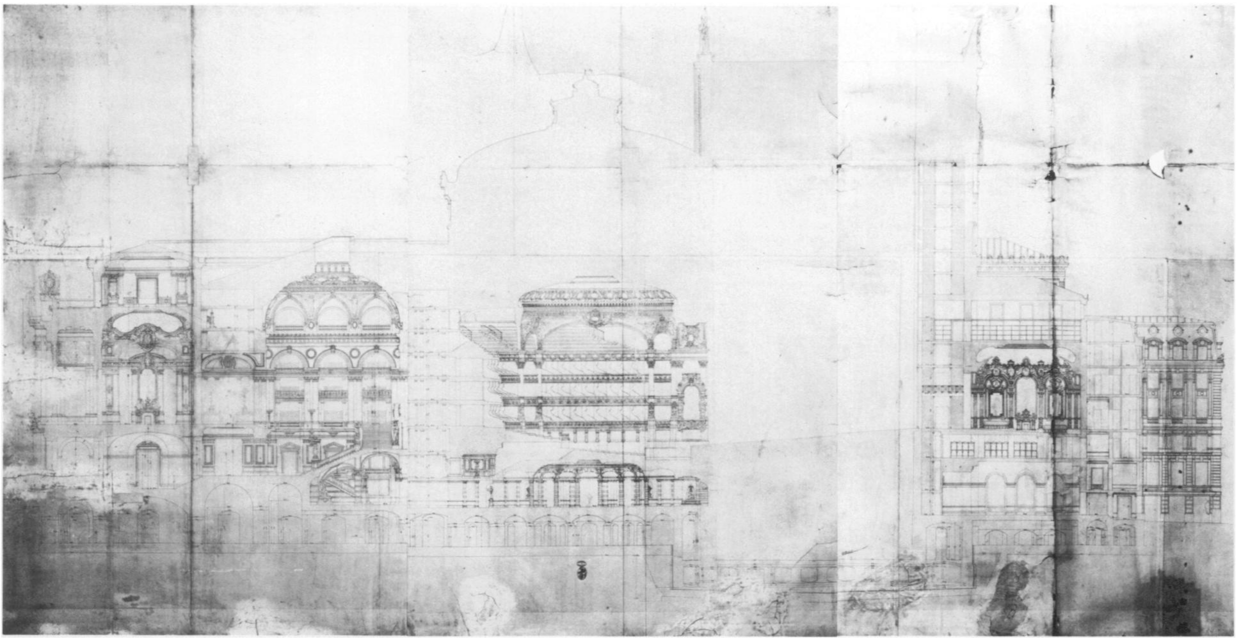


Fig. 11. Charles Garnier (1825–1898)
Study for longitudinal section of the Paris Opéra, 1861–62
Ink and pencil on paper, 59 x 142" (150 x 360 cm)
Musée de l'Opéra

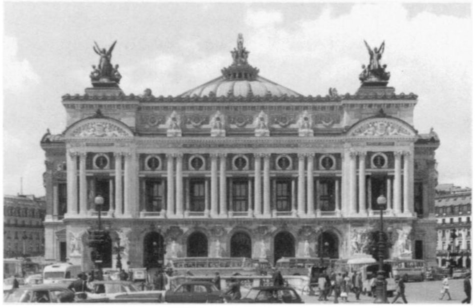


Fig. 12. Charles Garnier
Paris Opéra, 1861–75

'restless.' The whole of architecture is, in fact, unconsciously invested by us with human movement and human moods. . . . This is the humanism of architecture. The tendency to project the image of our functions into concrete forms is the basis of architecture, of creative design."[1]

In the same year that Lefuel designed the *guichets*, a still younger architect, thirty-six year old Charles Garnier, conceived the most famous example of the "Style Napoléon III," the Paris Opéra (figs. 11 and 12). In this building not only the details but also the very constituent volumes are rendered hard or soft: the pillow-like dome of the auditorium is set against the hard, angular form of the flytower; decorative figures break loose from the walls to float or stand or raise their arms in salute to the Emperor; the carved acanthus motifs curl with unconventional vigor, as if rooted and alive. The expressions of the functional parts of the building are subsumed by the vigorous motion of a richly clothed body.

Frank Furness

This strange "Style Napoléon III," truly the style of Second Empire Paris, was not that of McArthur's City Hall, but it did have a parallel in Philadelphia. Professor Neil Levine pointed out that it is to be found in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, begun by Frank Furness in 1871 on North Broad Street, within sight of City Hall (fig. 13).[2] Perhaps the least telling feature of its facade is a scattering of Gothic details. Its pavilion composition, mansarded roofs, and the columnar frame around the door and central window, suggest that it is a study in classical masses, surprisingly like City Hall, as has often been noticed. Moreover the dominant quality of the facade is the layering of its surface to exhibit its depth. A tall, battered, rusticated base appears and disappears across its breadth below a checkering produced by a carved frieze fragmented and set back into a smooth mass of limestone and brick. The solidity of the parts is emphasized—the colonnettes flanking the doorway are set deep into flat limestone balks which seem to bend the lintel between them in a low segmental arch, pierced by the trumeau which is carried up as a statue base. Furness's handling of the facade suggests the sculptural technique of Lefuel and Garnier. He was aware of what was happening in Second Empire Paris through his teacher, Richard Morris Hunt, who had been a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (1845–52), and then one of Lefuel's assistants at the New Louvre (1852–55), before he came to New York and set up an atelier in 1858 to teach what he had learned. Hunt continued to visit Paris almost yearly during the 1860s and it was precisely this strange empathetic distortion of the classical vocabulary that characterized his work of these years, as the critic Montgomery Schuyler explained at length in the *Architectural Record*.[3]

Furness's most extraordinary design, the Provident Life and Trust Company that until its demolition in 1960 loomed over Chestnut Street, was conceived in the same year that the Pennsylvania Academy was inaugurated, 1876, and completed in 1879 (fig. 14). The qualities of the Pennsylvania Academy facade are present here even more emphatically. The Provident Trust elevation is also sculpted, in this case from a consistent plane of granite masonry: the elements are in the round—they are three-dimensional, seemingly separate parts. And as separate parts they are fitted together: the cornice of the pavilion rests heavily on the cornice of the facade plane; the pavilion is supported by a pair of columns bracketed from the wall; the whole front rests at its base on four free-standing pillars. You can take the facade apart and reassemble it in your mind, as you can a Greek temple. These individual, sculpted parts, in turn, have been cut to appear capable of movement—to seem to receive weight and exert thrust. The colonnettes are squeezed to short stubs while their plinths and abaci expand in response; the second-story brackets bend under the weight of the cantilevered pavilion. Finally, the scale of the parts has broken loose from the dictates of convention: some are too big, some too small, just as a muscle in action flexes and enlarges while a muscle at rest contracts, or as a arm and hand are enlarged by a sculptor seeking to emphasize a gesture. The loosening of the canons of scale and proportion also implies that the individual parts have been set free to negotiate their relative size among themselves, to fit themselves together as the particular nature of the whole they compose suggests. Thus freed, the details expand and touch so as to reduce the apparent size of the whole building—to make it a kind of huge doll's-house bank—with the result that instead of a flat plane periodically marked with motifs revealing its character through associations, like a page of writing, the facade is a tightly compressed organism, with every piece locked into place, and no neutral, passive "paper" showing through between.

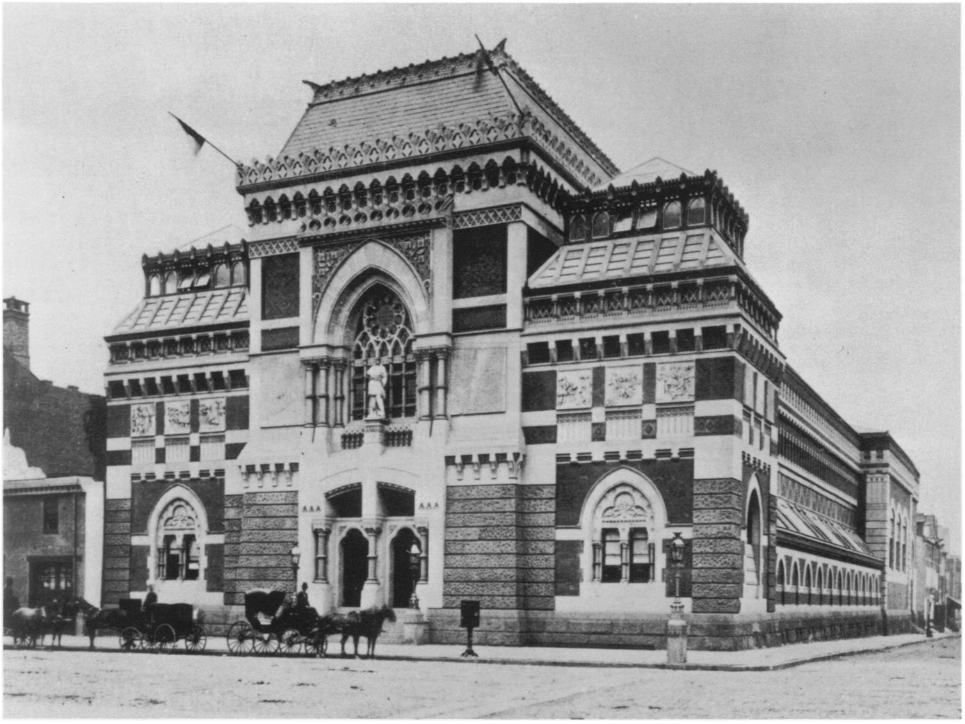


Fig. 13. Frank Furness
(1839–1912)
Pennsylvania Academy of
the Fine Arts,
Philadelphia, 1871–76
Pennsylvania Academy of
the Fine Arts

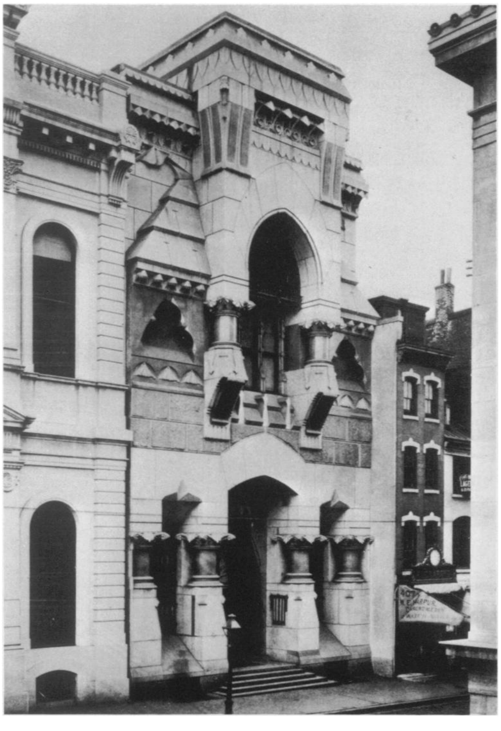


Fig. 14. Frank Furness
Provident Life and Trust
Company, Philadelphia,
1876–79
Historical Society of
Pennsylvania, Penrose
Collection

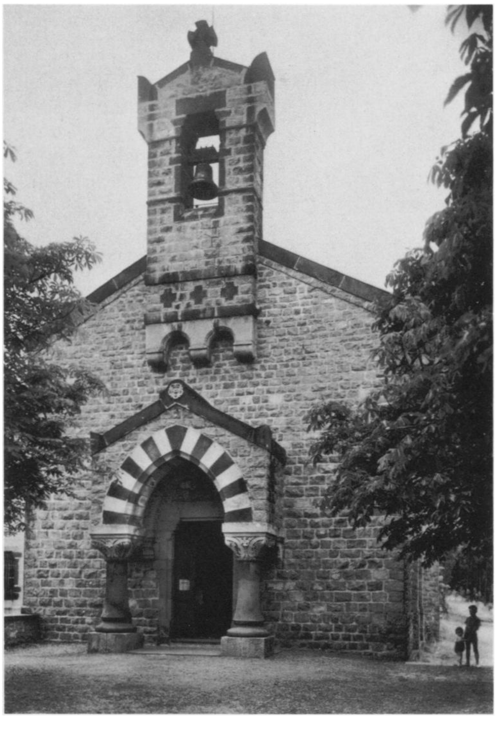


Fig. 15. Pierre Bossan
(1814–1888)
Notre Dame de la Roche,
Tarrare, France, 1866

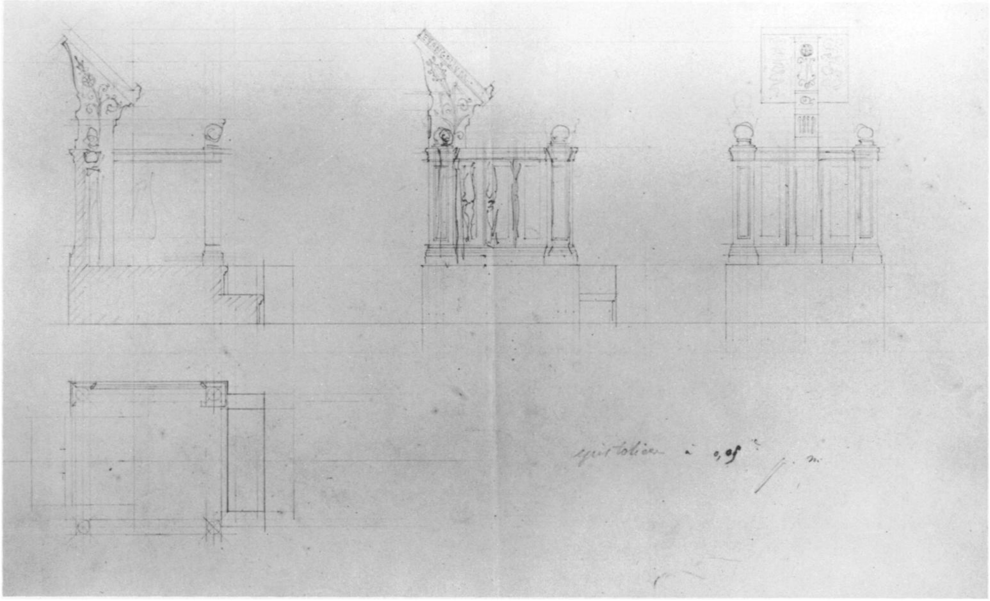


Fig. 16. Simon-Claude Constant-Dufeux (1801–1871)
Design for a Pulpit, Sainte Geneviève, Paris, c. 1852
Pencil on paper, 20 x 28" (52 x 71.7 cm)
Archives Nationales, Paris

The "Néo-Grec"

The similarities between Furness's work and that of Lefuel and Garnier are owed to a common source, the "Néo-Grec," as Levine has pointed out. The architectural movement designated by that name was as difficult to understand as it was fascinating in its productions—and remains so today. Its original protagonists were Henri Labrouste and a group of his contemporaries, among them S.-C. Constant-Dufeux. Working through the 1830s and 1840s, they evolved its theory and vocabulary to a point at which, in 1850, there appeared a large number of "Néo-Grec" works by them and by their students and imitators. Among the latter was Richard Morris Hunt, who, in his New York atelier (1858–61), explained the ideas of the movement to students, including Furness and Henry Van Brunt. Van Brunt, in his article "Greek Lines" in the *Atlantic Monthly* of 1861, made one of the earliest attempts to communicate these ideas in writing.

The basis of the "Néo-Grec" was the rejection of fixed vocabularies of form and canons of proportion and the search for the individual characterization of buildings through abstraction and expressive distortion. Labrouste's student Pierre Bossan compared building types to zoological species: as the physiognomy of an animal expresses its fighting, running, or ruminating nature, so should the physiognomy of a building communicate the function that calls it into being. "In a robust physiognomy, everything partakes of this quality—look at the Norman dray, the Auvergnat bull, the basset hound. In an elegant ensemble, every part must be elegant—look at the gazelle, the jack rabbit, the Arabian stallion."[4] Thus the "Néo-Grec" sanctioned expressive distortion of form and decoration, as long as such exaggeration was consistent within a single design and expressive of its material and function. So Constant-Dufeux, designing a reading stand for a pulpit in 1852 (fig. 16), eschewed the finicky details of the historical styles. Instead his design is justified by the function of the stand, that of supporting an inclined surface for the book: he has cut the silhouette of the pedestal to describe a series of broad, abstract curves, tight and compressed on the inward side while broad

Fig. 17. Pierre Bossan
Interior of Notre Dame
de la Roche, Tarrare,
France, 1866

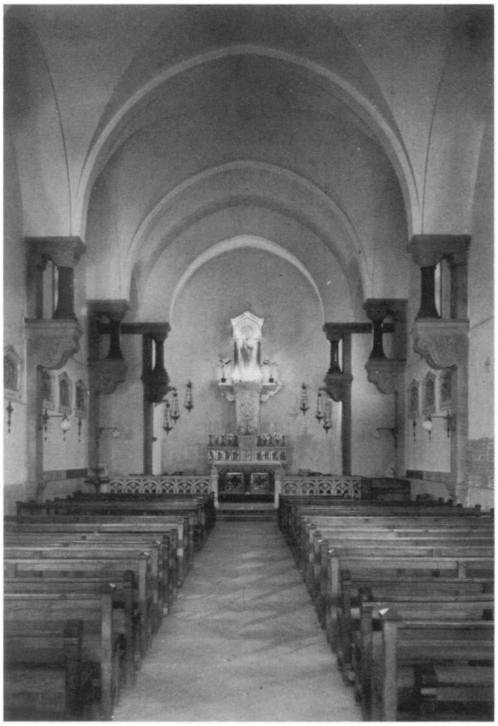


Fig. 18. Alphonse Girard
(1806–1872)
Mairie of the Third
Arrondissement, Paris,
1852

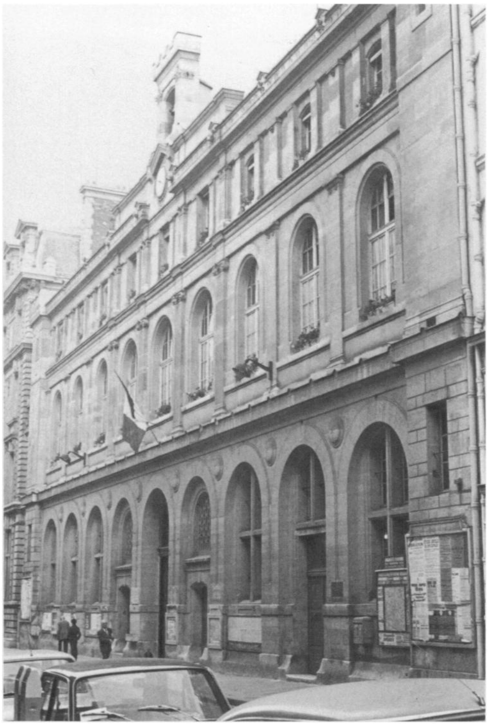
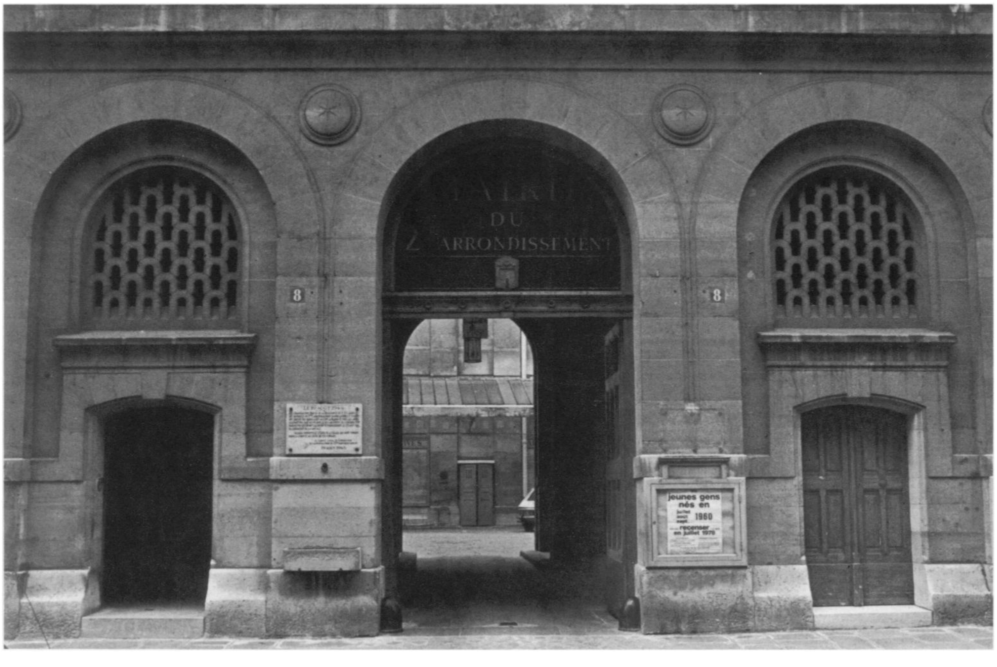


Fig. 19. Alphonse Girard
Mairie of the Third
Arrondissement (detail of
doorway), Paris, 1852



and expanding on the outward; and he has inscribed on each side of its otherwise square and unadorned form two stylized flower motifs which seem to bend in response to the implied pressures in the stand.

At about the same date Labrouste's friend Alphonse Girard designed a whole building, the *mairie* of the third arrondissement in Paris (fig. 18) in this manner. Its elevation is stark, overscaled and heavy as he selects the form of the arcade to be the essential constituent element of the facade. Subordinate motifs are fitted into it. At the door (fig. 19) the central bay is left void as a carriage entrance, two flanking pedestrian doorways are formed by carrying the plinth molding up as lintels, and a stone grill fills the rest of the bays. The building is in no canonical historical style; the ornament consists of abstract bevelings and curvings of the structure of the architectural masses; the details are overscaled, deeply incut, and tightly joined together.

The parallel with Furness, then, is clear: he, like the "Néo-Grecs," used abstraction and distortion of form to make a building both organically whole and decisively expressive of a particular quality—in the case of the Provident Trust, strength and protection, as appropriate to a bank. Also like the "Néo-Grecs," Furness modeled his buildings out of masses of masonry: there is nothing Gothic about the Provident Trust but the historical origin of its details.

It is a long imaginative leap from Furness to Girard, but the work of another "Néo-Grec" designer already mentioned, Pierre Bossan, may serve to bring out their affinity. During the 1850s and 1860s he built a large number of churches around Lyons, working infinite variations upon the type, as did Furness with his Philadelphia banks. Bossan's little parish church of 1855 in the farm village of Bully (fig. 20) is of bright yellow limestone stricken with white bands and ornamented with black marble stars and banding about he door. It seems conventional enough in its imagery, but remarkably massive and solid in the simplicity and overscaling of its parts and the beveling of its forms. Its style is medieval (although perhaps more Byzantine than Gothic), but its deep relief, its compressed elements, and its large details are classical in the sense of the "Néo-Grec."

Compared with Bully, Bossan's shrine of Notre Dame de la Roche of 1866 (fig. 15) on a mountain peak is more primitive: the red sandstone walls are left rough-surfaced, the porch is borne on squat, expressionistically curving black volcanic columns below a hugely overscaled bell cot. The vault of the interior is effortfully supported by rows of squat columns bracketed out from the walls (fig. 17). Finally, Bossan's larger pilgrimage church at La Louvesque of 1865, on the shoulder of two mountains in the Massif Central (fig. 21), gestures to the valley before it with a yawning arched entrance built between its two towers, its arch held on a pair of stubby colonnettes (fig. 22). All the exterior details seem too simple and too large. The interior columns seem to thrust against the low, impending vault (fig. 23). Here in Bossan's designs are all of Furness's tricks, the more easily recognizable for being rendered in a medieval style: the sculptural relief and physicality, the tightly fitted parts, expressive distortion, and overscaling of details, all to hold the building together and to give it a unified character.

There is no reason to believe that Furness had ever heard of Bossan. Their buildings are

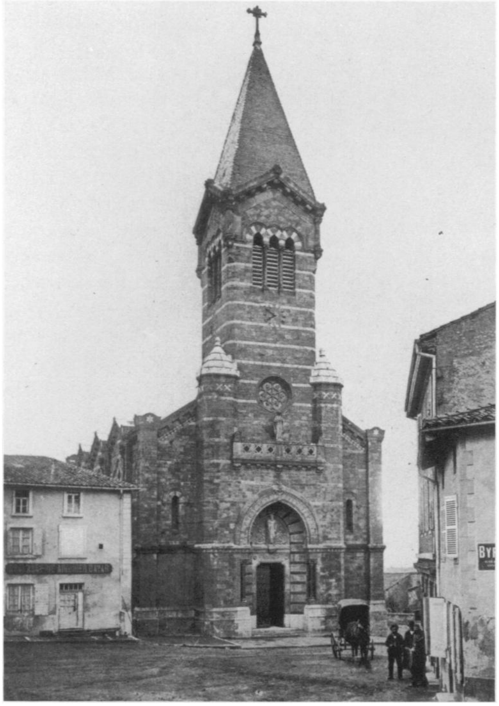


Fig. 20. Pierre Bossan
Parish church of Bully, France, 1855
From Felix Thiollier, *L'Oeuvre de Pierre Bossan* (Montbrison, 1891)

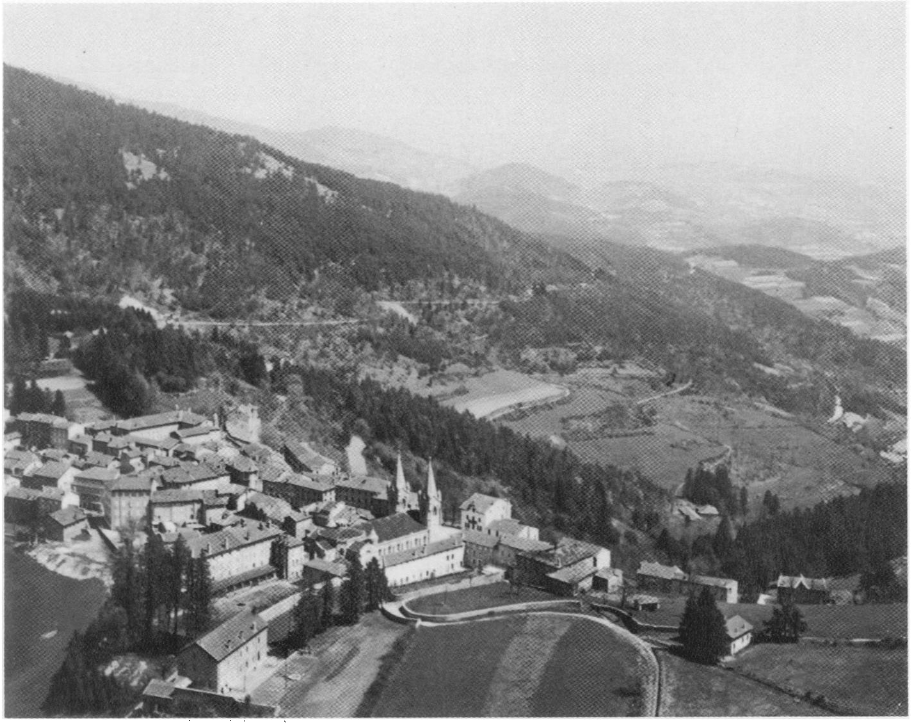


Fig. 21. Pierre Bossan Pilgrimage church, La Louvesque, France, 1865

similar because they are based on the same, "Néo-Grec" principles: tightly fitted unification coupled with expressive distortion produced by means of a classical sculpting of masonry masses. It was from the inspiration of these principles that French architecture evolved during the mid-nineteenth century, finally engendering the popular "Style Napoléon III" of Lefuel and Garnier. In grasping these principles and in creating a personal architecture from them, Furness carried Philadelphia achitecture away from the reproduction of European models and the outdated associationalism of McArthur's City Hall. It was in this way that the Second Empire became the major inspiration for the first truly mature, independent American architecture—that of Hunt and Furness; of Furness's student, Louis Sullivan; and of Sullivan's student, Frank Lloyd Wright.

Fig. 22. Pierre Bossan
Pilgrimage church, La
Louvesque, France, 1865

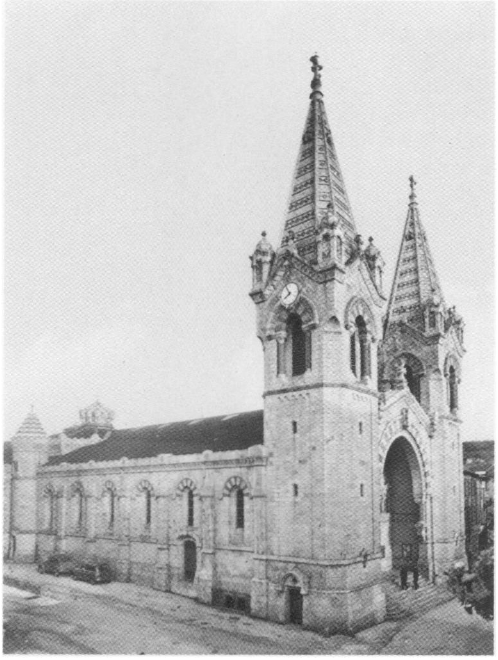
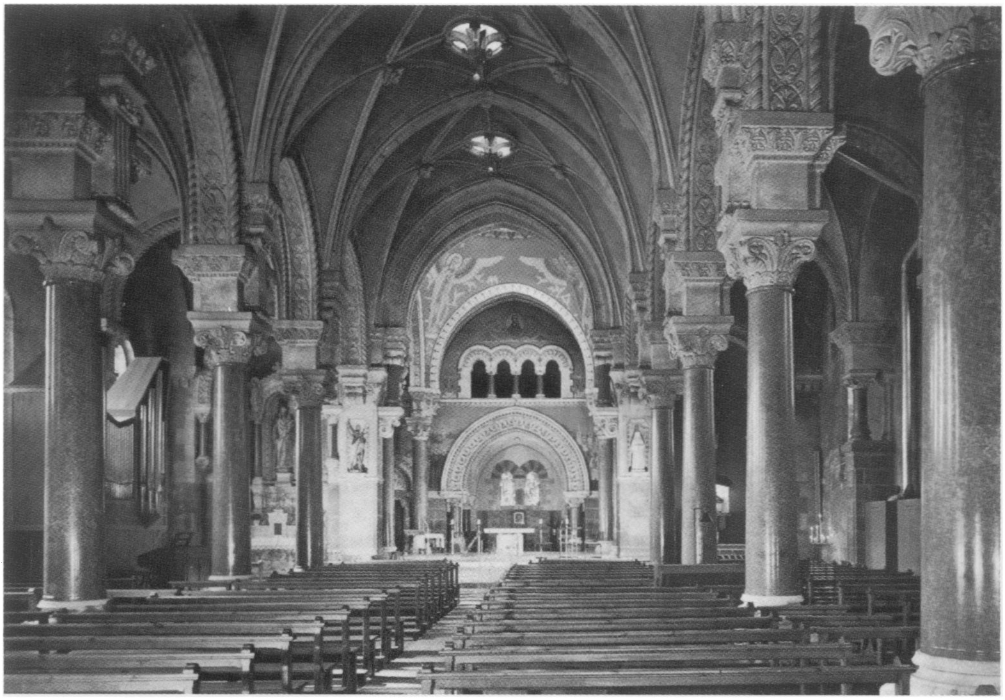


Fig. 23. Pierre Bossan
Interior of pilgrimage
church, La Louvesque,
France, 1865



Notes

1. Second edition (London, 1924), p. 159.
2. *The Idea of Frank Furness' Buildings*, M.A. dissertation, Yale University, 1968.
The architecture of Furness was further elucidated by James O'Gorman's introductory essay in *The Architecture of Frank Furness* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973).
3. October-December, 1895.
4. Sainte-Marie Perrin, *Pierre Bossan, Architecte* (Lyons, 1889), pp. 15-16.

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